

Downsize the military

By Lawrence J. Korb

In the eight years since the unexpected collapse of the Soviet empire undermined its primary reason for existence, the Pentagon has tried to reinvent itself on no less than five occasions. Yet despite these efforts, the Defense Department has not yet changed enough to make itself relevant to the challenges of the 21st century. The answer is not to do yet another study, but to apply the good ideas already contained in the previous five efforts.

The first analysis, done in 1990 by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, produced the Base Force. This analysis suggested correctly that defense spending could be cut 25 percent below its Cold War level. However, the chiefs used an artificially high base against which to measure the reductions. Thus, as the decade of the 1990s draws to a close, the United States spends more on defense than all its potential rivals combined and together with its allies accounts for 80 percent of the world's total military expenditures.

The military justified this high level of defense spending by postulating that it needed to be able to fight two major wars simultaneously without help from any of our allies and that the forces of our potential adversaries were qualitatively equal to those of the United States.

The second post-Cold War analysis, known as the Bottom Up Review, was conducted in 1993 by Les Aspin. Because he

felt it was important for the United States to strengthen its economy to compete in the international arena, Clinton's first secretary of defense tried to reduce defense spending and free up some military forces for peacekeeping by modifying the two-war assumption. But when word of Aspin's intentions were leaked to the media by the military, the administration retreated. Aspin tried to make slight reductions in the projected levels of defense spending. But after protests by the Joint Chiefs and congressional hawks, Clinton allowed the cuts to be restored.

Ironically, this state of affairs seemed to satisfy no one. As the US military took on peace-keeping operations in Haiti and Bosnia, many in the Pentagon and Congress argued that US readiness to fight two major wars was being undermined and that it was short of funds to invest in new technologies. Others wondered why the US share of the world's military expenditures had risen from 25 to 35 percent. To deal with these issues, the Pentagon promised to conduct another strategic review after the 1996 election, and Congress chartered an outside panel to review the results.

The Pentagon's review, known as the Quadrennial Defense Review, was unveiled in May 1997 by William Cohen, the new secretary of defense. Cohen also flirted with the idea of modifying the two-war concept to free up funds for peacekeeping and innovation. But he, too, backed off and made small marginal reductions in

the force structure. Cohen set up a reform panel to free additional funds by asking it to apply to the Defense Department those business practices that US industry uses to remain competitive.

This group of outside experts produced the Defense Reform Initiative of November 1997, which said the Pentagon could save \$6 billion a year through application of these business practices. Although the amount of savings was unrealistic, the panel pointed out that the Pentagon has too many bases and that too much of its depot maintenance is done by the government rather than the private sector.

The final analysis was done by the congressionally mandated National Defense Panel, a group of nine outside experts, including four retired flag officers. The panel, which unveiled its findings on Dec. 1, found

the two-war concept not only obsolete but primarily a device for justifying the "Cold War Lite" structure. It also argued that the Pentagon was spending too much money on yesterday's weapons. Not surprisingly, when the Joint Chiefs opposed the group's recommendations, Secretary Cohen refused to endorse them.

Combining the good ideas of these five studies can protect our national security interests at significantly lower costs. The two-war concept should be dropped. Since no one took advantage of the United States when we were bogged down in Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf, it is, to say the least, an unlikely contingency. The Defense Department needs to prepare for one major war as well as set aside some forces for peace-keeping.

Dropping the obsolete two-war concept would allow the

Pentagon to reduce the size of the force structure and to cut back on the increasingly large amounts of money spent on maintaining the force in such a high state of readiness. The department should also scale back the purchase of yesterday's weapons programs. Finally, the secretary of defense ought to announce the list of bases he wants closed and the specific maintenance work he wants transferred to the private sector. Savings generated from adopting these recommendations would free up funds to work on emerging information and information-related technologies that would transform the battlefield of the future.

These steps would also allow a reduction in defense spending to a level that is actually 25 percent below the average peacetime Cold War level. From the end of the war in Vietnam to the end of the

Cold War, defense expenditures averaged in today's dollars about \$315 billion annually. But during the first Clinton administration, spending on defense averaged about \$280 billion a year, or only a 12 percent real reduction. A 25 percent reduction from the 1976-'90 level would have brought the average down to about \$235 billion.

The ideas and analyses already exist. But the question remains: Do the Clinton administration, its political appointees in the Pentagon, and Congress have the wisdom and will to implement them?

Lawrence J. Korb is a senior fellow in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at the Brookings Institution. He was an assistant secretary of defense during the Reagan administration.